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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the reactions of the U.S. focus group of the National Council for History Education to proposed standards for the U.S. history curriculum. General concerns of classroom teachers about the proposed standards include the lack of a developmental concept from kindergarten through grade 12, and too much influence of present-mindedness. The participants suggested two serious obstacles to the application of the standards: (1) not enough time in the normal curriculum to cover the recommended material effectively, and (2) the majority of K-12 teachers do not have the educational background and training necessary to teach in a history curriculum based on the adoption of these standards. Group comments are broken down into nine areas: (1) criteria, including suggestions on wording in criteria 1, 9, 12, and 15; (2) major themes (history of science is not included and should be); (3) periodization; (4) content standards; (5) process standards (the emphasis on critical thinking and historiography may be too optimistic); (6) performance standards (a glossary was suggested, and the standards for grades 9-12 should build on earlier grades, not repeat them; (7) suggested teaching and learning activities; (8) feasibility (the scope and approach of the standards would almost certainly require more than two years of history); and (9) accommodating variability. The group suggested that ideally the United States history and the world history teams should get together to develop several model programs so that curriculum planners could have effective guidance. (DK)

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National Council for History Education, Inc.

promoting history in school and society

THE PROPOSED U.S. HISTORY STANDARDS: A REPORT

FROM THE NCHE U.S. HISTORY FOCUS GROUP

Byron Hollinshead, Chair of the Focus Group

The NCHE Focus Group participants were greatly impressed with the quality and scope of the March '93 Progress Report and Sample Standards, which is endorsed with enthusiasm. Typical comments were "a truly outstanding report," "an admirable and significant piece of work," and "an important contribution to promoting history education in the schools." Only one participant expressed disappointment (but not surprise) with the materials.

At the same time there were some general concerns expressed, primarily by classroom teachers. These concerns crop up in responses to the questions but seem worth summarizing at the outset.

There is a feeling that the document reflects "top-down" thinking and that it lacks, in this draft, a developmental concept from kindergarten through grade 12. It may be that the addition of content standards, performance standards, and teaching/learning activities for K-4 will help. The content standards appear to be concerned primarily with intellectual capacity, while paying little attention to the varying psychological and temperamental characteristics of children at different age levels. The Bradley Commission report observes that "young children are fascinated by heroes, amazing deeds, fantastic tales, and stories of extraordinary feats and locales." Kieran Egan, in his excellent book, **Imagination in Teaching and Learning,** makes a persuasive case that the key to learning is in the engagement of the child's imagination and that there are different stages of imaginative development that need to be recognized in order to achieve effective teaching and learning. A related general point, made by several participants, is that biography is an especially effective way to stimulate student interest and that perhaps more biographical material could be included in the teaching/learning activities.

Another general concern is that the Content Standards and the Performance Standards are influenced by present-mindedness. One participant felt that the Performance Standards had been "obviously constructed to conform to ideological presentism." The sense, among those who have raised this issue, is that the project should encourage students to think historically, to try to understand past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time rather than suggesting constant comparison with events and issues today (though one respondent liked the call for constant comparison to the present). The Bradley Commission Report, page 9, *History's Habits of the Mind* is thoughtful and suggestive on this issue.

Several of the teachers in the group felt that though the draft Standards are thought provoking, comprehensive and altogether admirable in themselves, the application of the Standards faces two serious obstacles: 1. There is simply not enough time in the normal curriculum to cover the recommended material effectively, and 2. the great majority of K-12 teachers don't have the educational background and training necessary to teach in a history curriculum based on the adoption of these standards. One participant fears that the report will be dismissed as "pie in the sky" by K-12 teachers unless the question of time constraints is addressed directly. Another participant cites, as an example, the suggested Teaching/ Learning Activity for grades 5-8, page 140, which suggests that teacher and students develop a general definition of republicanism that students can

apply to an analysis of examples from several state constitutions. Many, if not most, elementary and even junior high school teachers, given present training, would be intimidated by this and similar suggested activities.

The NCHE, as the successor organization to the Bradley Commission, is deeply committed to the promotion of more and better history in our schools. The Bradley Commission recommended that the K-6 social studies curriculum be history-centered and that there should be no fewer than four years of required history in grades 7-12. We remain committed to this and hope that the National History Standards Project will help to achieve it. Similarly, the NCHE is committed to the improvement of the teaching of history by providing opportunity for retraining teachers and by promoting the Commission's recommendation that social studies teachers at middle school and high school levels be required to complete a substantial program in history to obtain certification.

I. CRITERIA

The participants were generally enthusiastic about the criteria as presented. There were several suggestions for logical combinations but the framers undoubtedly preferred shorter, separate statements.

One participant strongly suggested that number 8 be moved to number 1 because it emphasizes the central reason to study American history: to help to develop better-informed citizens. This suggestion is reinforced by the comments of other participants to the effect that those preparing standards should recognize that schools are educating citizens, not training future historians.

Many, if not most, of the participants in the focus group are aware of the controversy about the wording of number 13. The majority did not comment on this clause which implies acceptance as written. The several who did comment felt that it was appropriate to single out Western civilization because of its unique contribution to the development of American social and political institutions. At the same time the importance of studying non-western civilizations and the interactions among all civilizations is strongly endorsed.

Some suggestions on wording:

Criterion 1. Consider "intellectually stimulating" rather than "demanding." While it is recognized that standards should be high and should apply to all students, an obstacle that must be addressed and overcome is that a majority of students (and many teachers) don't find history courses interesting.

Criterion 9. line 5. - "reflect" is not the right word; "develop an understanding of" would be better.

Criterion 12. Oral history and use of historic sites might be mentioned specifically as resources for research in local and regional history.

Criterion 15. Perhaps the standards should also seek to develop in students an appreciation of narrative history itself, an imaginative sense of the past as someone else's present, an understanding that events needn't have happened as they did. This sense of dramatic tension contributes significantly to the enjoyment and understanding of history.

II MAJOR THEMES

Most of the participants felt that the themes were well chosen and should be endorsed as they stand. A minority view, with which the chairman is sympathetic, observes that without a more dynamic descriptive text these "themes" are more accurately described as "topics." For example, under *Politics*, which might be called *Law and Politics*, the continuing tension between majority rule and minority rights is a theme; under *Economics/Technology* the tension between government regulation and laissez faire could be a theme.

Science is not mentioned in the themes and should be. One participant made the strong point that the history of science is badly taught in the schools (and in colleges) and he makes a compelling case for its integration into history courses. One teacher felt that geography should be more strongly incorporated.

III. PERIODIZATION

Most of the participants accept the recommended periodization. There were several objections to the descriptive title of the first period: "Contact and Exchange." This seems to suggest that study should begin with the European exploration and settlement and there are still no content standards for this period that refute this impression.

Several participants questioned the choice of 1975 as the date to begin the final period; 1968 was one suggestion for a more logical split.

The emphasis on the twentieth century was endorsed but there are differing notions as to what periods should be em-

phasized at different grade levels. The California framework for the fifth grade stops short of the Civil War. Many teachers feel that elementary and middle school students should get a thorough grounding in American history though the 19th century in order to be able to deal with the complex issues of the 20th. The NAEP framework for American history, which presumably will be the basis for national tests, emphasizes the early periods in the early grades and shifts the emphasis to the twentieth century in the last years of high school. It seems logical for the National Standards and NAEP to be compatible and mutually reinforcing.

IV. CONTENT STANDARDS

The group felt that the Content Standards are thoughtful and well conceived and a number of the participants accepted this section without comment. There are a number of specific suggestions which cannot usefully be summarized but which should be noted.

There were two general suggestions made by individual participants:

One reviewer asked that the framing questions for all content standards be listed. He feels that having these questions would help teachers to conceptualize curriculum frameworks.

Another reviewer suggested that the final draft should state explicitly that these standards will appear and reappear. That the standards are not grade (nor grade cluster) specific, but provide the connecting elements of the K-12 curriculum.

V. PROCESS STANDARDS

The group was divided in its reaction to the Process Standards. The majority felt they were acceptable as drafted and were grade-appropriate. One reviewer suggested that students in grades 5-8 were perhaps more capable of higher order thinking skills than were reflected in the standards. The inclusion of a K-4 section in the tables is helpful and gives the reviewers a better sense of the developmental concept of the National Standards project.

A minority felt that the Process Standards are unrealistically high in terms of today's educational institutions. One reviewer feels the emphasis on critical thinking is geared too high and the emphasis on historiography in grades 9-12 too optimistic. It is pointed out that most classes now use one textbook and have a difficult time getting though all the required material.

This same concern is reflected in the comments of others who endorsed the Process Standards. One reviewer finds the material "strong, powerful, effective and stimulating" but asks how they will be implemented. "Who will write the textbooks and compile the resource materials? Who will re-train the teachers?" Another suggests that for these standards to be effective it will be necessary for schools to hire teachers with training in history as well as teaching skills and to abandon the notion that history can be taught by anyone with a general social studies background.

VI. PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

There are many specific suggestions in the individual reports on Performance Standards and they will not be listed in this summary. Overall, the material was endorsed with comments ranging from "nicely varied," "very thorough and detailed" to "great." Several reviewers commented favorably on the verbs used to describe the approach to the material: "analyze, distinguish, debate, describe, examine, compare, identify, assess" etc. A glossary would be an excellent idea.

Several of the reviewers endorsed the material without comment. For most, the reply to the two questions is "yes, but."

There were three comments on the repetition of material for grades 5-8 and 9-12 and it was noted that students often complain of duplication in 5-8 and 9-12 U.S. history programs. Curriculum planners would like to see either a difference in content or in the types of activities planned. The standards for 9-12 should build on the earlier grades, not repeat them.

VII. SUGGESTED TEACHING/LEARNING ACTIVITIES

The suggested teaching/learning activities section was endorsed enthusiastically by our group. The inclusion of suggested resources for teachers is a good feature though one reviewer felt that specific references to the **Magazine of History** and to units prepared by the National Center for History in the Schools constituted inappropriate self promotion. The reviewer suggests instead that a recommended bibliography of source material be developed for all of the activities.

The activities are linked to the Content and Performance Standards. It might be helpful to teachers to have the activities keyed to Process Standards as well.

The use of works of art in the activities was endorsed with en-

thusiasm. It was suggested that local education departments in museums, zoos, parks and other cultural organizations can be sources of ideas and activities.

While there were a number of detailed suggestions the reviewers liked the suggested activities and felt the material to be useful and grade-appropriate. But the same concerns appeared about time constraints and teachers' ability to handle this kind of activity. One reviewer was of the opinion that it would be difficult to get through even half of the standards if these suggested activities were part of the curriculum. A related concern is that of access to suggested materials. It is wonderful to study paintings in order to understand the life of a historical period, but many schools don't have sets of slides or budgets to purchase them. Standard reference sets and even sources such as the **Magazine of History** and the National Center materials are not available in many if not most schools.

VIII. FEASIBILITY

In the response to the Feasibility question all of the concerns expressed in other areas come together. Two of the respondents said that the performance standards and related activities are possible if seen as a "menu" from which to select. Others believe that it simply is not feasible to cover the standards assuming two years of instruction from grades 5-12. And some others felt that the attempt to "cover" the standards in two years would discourage the depth of study needed for historical understanding.

Of course the three different responses amount to the same thing: That the scope and approach represented in the standards and the suggested activities, in order to be fully realized, would almost certainly require more than two years of history in the eight years of middle school and high school education.

There are three ways to approach a solution: 1. The first is the "menu" approach, which leaves the selection to individual teachers and curriculum planners at various levels. (This seems to be suggested in the second paragraph page 49.) 2. The second is to emphasize one chronological period (say up to 1865) in one course and the later period in another. 3. The third possibility would be to reject the assumption in the question and to recommend the addition of at least one more year of American history instruction in grades 5-12 (Patterns, on page 48).

IX. ACCOMMODATING VARIABILITY

It is much easier to summarize the responses to this question than it has been with questions 1-8. The members of our group would encourage the National Standards Project to consider making a recommendation about the school history curriculum which would probably include several possible models. It doesn't necessarily follow, as stated on page 49, that the only alternative to accommodating a wide variety of curriculum patterns is to recommend exact standards that would, in effect, establish a national curriculum.

The Bradley Commission suggested that the K-6 social studies curriculum be "history centered" but suggested several curricular patterns. Similarly, the Commission suggested that there be no fewer than four years of history among the six years from grades 7-12 but, again, four possible curricular patterns were outlined.

Ideally, the NCHE group would like to see the U.S. history and the world history teams get together to develop several model programs so that curriculum planners could have effective guidance. It would also seem appropriate for the National Standards to correlate its recommendations, in a general way, with the NAEP testing program in history which apparently has now been given a green light by the Clinton administration.√

NCHE U.S. History Focus Group

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